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Monster Fires Return, Forcing Australians To Flee; Protesters Call For Prime Minister'S Ouster As Bushfires Ravage Populous Southeast

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Body

Australian authorities urged another mass evacuation across the heavily populated southeast on Thursday as a return of hot weather fanned huge bushfires threatening several towns and communities.

Victoria state Premier Daniel Andrews urged communities to be on alert ahead of the extreme conditions.

"If you receive instructions to leave, then you must leave," Andrews said in a televised briefing. "That is the only way to guarantee your safety."

Parts of Kangaroo Island, a wildlife-rich tourist spot off the southeast coast where Prime Minister Scott Morrison on Wednesday made a plea for foreign tourists not to be deterred by the fires, were again evacuated on Thursday.

"I urge everyone to heed warnings, follow advice, and to head to the east part of the island, which is deemed safe at this point," South Australia Fire Chief Mark Jones said in a separate briefing in Adelaide.

A third of the island has been destroyed.

Twenty-seven people have been killed this fire season, according to the federal government, as the monster fires have scorched through more than 10.3-million hectares of land, an area the size of South Korea.

Thousands have been made homeless and thousands have had to evacuate repeatedly because of the volatility of the fires.

Residents of the coastal town of Mallacoota, where thousands of people were stranded on a beach for days until a military evacuation that only ended on Wednesday, were among those again advised to flee.

"If we evacuate, where do we go?" said Mark Tregellas, who spent New Year's Eve on a boat ramp as fire destroyed much of his town, and one of about 1,000 people who decided to stay.

"The electricity is slowly coming back but everyone is reliant on generators, and fuel for those is very limited," he told Reuters by telephone from his house.

More than one-billion mammals, birds and reptiles nationwide - some of them found nowhere else on Earth - may have been affected or killed by the fires sweeping across Australia, according to a University of Sydney estimate. The potential toll is far greater when other types of animals are included.

"We're not just talking about koalas, we're talking mammals, birds, plants, fungi, insects, other invertebrates, amphibians and bacteria and microorganisms that are critical to these systems," said Manu Saunders, a research fellow and insect ecologist at the University of New England in Armidale.

Individual animals might survive, but when their habitat is gone, "it doesn't matter," Saunders said. "They'll die anyway."

On Friday, thousands of activists are planning to march in nine cities to protest the prime minister's response to the fires.

The phrase "Sack Scomo" - a play on the Australian leader's name - has become one rallying cry.

"We demand the government: Pay all firefighters and give the force full funding; Provide genuine relief and aid for affected communities; Begin the immediate rapid transition away from fossil fuels; Sack Scomo!" reads one Facebook page for a protest in Melbourne organized by the Uni Students for ***Climate Justice***.

However, the bush fires themselves may complicate the outrage. On Wednesday, Lisa Neville, the emergency services minister for Victoria state, which includes Melbourne, called on activists to cancel or postpone their march, as fires are expected to worsen in the area Friday.

"I don't want to see police having to pull people out of (fire-affected) communities to come in and manage a protest," The Guardian reported Neville saying.

Australia relies on thousands of volunteer firefighters who have had to leave their day jobs to battle the flames.

Distraught residents have criticized Morrison and appealed to national and international aid groups for help in fighting the fires and dealing with the aftermath.

Some celebrities and billionaires have heeded the call.

Australian actor Chris Hemsworth this week pledged to donate US$1 million and implored his social media followers to contribute as well.

Singer Elton John, while on tour in Sydney, announced that he will also donate US$1 million to aid affected Australians.

Other celebrities who have announced donations include Aussie Nicole Kidman and her husband, Kiwi-Australian Keith Urban. The couple have donated US$500,000 to Australia's firefighters; in 2018, they donated US$100,000 toward drought relief. The couple in 2008 bought a US$4.1-million farm in Bunya Hill, Australia - a property they say is now under threat from the fires.

American singer Lizzo, who is on tour in Australia, volunteered at a food bank in Victoria this week and implored her fans to pay attention to the climate connection.

Morrison has promised to pay "whatever it takes" to help affected communities. On Sunday, he pledged that his government would commit an extra US$1.4 billion toward recoveries, on top of the tens of million of dollars already allocated. !@COPYRIGHT=© 2020 Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved.

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